

INTRODUCTION

On June 3, 1979, the Petroleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) oil well blew out and ignited in the Bay of Campeche which is 500 miles south of the coast of Texas. (See Map) The well, known as the IXTOC I, has spilled more than 3 million barrels of oil into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. As of this writing the well has still not been capped. Until early July, 1979, the spill remained near the wellhead. Seventy days after the blowout, oil appeared in Texas waters and on Texas beaches in the form of tar balls, "mousse" (oil weathered to a fudge-like consistency), and slicks. Beaches were affected from Port Aransas to the mouth of the Rio Grande. In September, changes in the prevailing winds and currents caused the oil to stay in Mexican waters. When the currents resume their northerly flow, the oil could again threaten the Texas coastline.

Concerned that the oil from the spill affected a large area of the Texas coast, tourism, the fishing industry and possibly human health and the environment, Rep. Bill Clayton, Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, assigned the Committee on Environmental Affairs, chaired by Rep. Bennie Bock II, to conduct a study on the oil spill's effects.

This report attempts to answer the following charges (as presented by the Speaker):

1. monitor the effects, immediate and long-term of the blowout, on the coastal environment;
2. evaluate the effectiveness of the cleanup effort and the Oil Spill Contingency Plan;
3. review federal, state, and local policies regarding assistance for natural and manmade disasters; and
4. determine if changes in State law are needed to address issues which include, but are not limited to, financial disaster aid.

At the time of the above charge to the committee, it was not anticipated that part of the problem would be the capping of the well. This report was delayed several months awaiting the capping of the well, and as of the date of this report the well still has not been plugged. Until the flow of oil is stopped, there is no way

GULF OF MEXICO

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Progressive Limits
of Oil from
Mexican Oil Well

October 4, 1979

September 28, 1979

BAY OF CAMPECHE

YUCATAN
PENINSULA

Pemex IXTOCI
Well Blowout
June 3, 1979

Latitude 19° 21'
Longitude 92° 19'

July 13, 1979

September 9, 1979

August 27, 1979 (Cedar Bayou
San Jose Island)

August 23, 1979

August 19, 1979

Oil Impacting Beaches
August 14, 15, 16, 1979

August 14, 1979

August 9, 1979

August 8, 1979

August 5, 1979

August 2, 1979

July 30, 1979

July 28, 1979

July 27, 1979

July 25, 1979

July 23, 1979

July 18, 1979

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to assess the final damages. Consequently, this report will attempt to document those answers that can be made with the obvious limitations.

On August 24, 1979, the Committee on Environmental Affairs held its first meeting in Corpus Christi to learn what action was being taken to safeguard the Texas coast. Various federal and state officials described their functions regarding the oil spill crisis.

On October 16, 1979, the Committee met again to discuss safeguards to prevent blowouts from occurring. Preventive training and educational programs were discussed. The Committee also heard testimony about developing oil spill cooperatives in the state.

In addition to the hearings, the Committee sought comments from the federal and state agencies, the universities, and industry. The Texas Department of Water Resources cooperated fully with the committee and continues to send progress reports concerning the flow of the oil as well as the cleanup operation. The General Land Office prepared a chart and supporting documentation showing the authority of the state to regulate oil, gas, and related operations to prevent oil spills. (See Appendix E)

In order to fulfill the request of the Speaker of the House to undertake an in-depth study of the threats posed both to the coastal environment and the economy of Texas by the Mexican oil spill, and at the request of the Speaker, the Committee on Environmental Affairs engaged the services of the Texas System of Natural Resources (TSNL) on a staff basis to assist in the evaluation process of the environmental impact.

FEDERAL/STATE CONTINGENCY PLANS

The National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan¹ was developed in compliance with the Federal Clean Water Act of 1977.² This plan seeks to insure a coordinated Federal response at the scene of a discharge of oil or hazardous substance. The On-Scene Coordinator (OSC) coordinates and directs the Federal response to spills, and discharge removal efforts at the scene of a discharge. The Coast Guard is charged with providing the OSC in the coastal